



## The Universal Meaning of Art

### I.

A tree is just as beautiful when it is depicted on linen as when it grows as a plant in nature; both produce a homogeneous aesthetic impression, belong to an identical evaluation—and it is not without reason that even the word used for its expression is one and the same in both cases.<sup>1</sup> But if everything was limited to such visible, superficial homogeneity, would it be possible to ask: What is this reduplication of nature for? And this question has, in fact, been asked. Is it not a child's game to duplicate in a picture that which already maintains its beautiful existence in nature? The usual response to this (for example, Taine in his *Philosophie de l'Art*) is that art does not reproduce the objects and phenomena of reality themselves but only that which the artist sees in them; and the true artist sees in them only their distinctive and *model* attributes. The aesthetic element of natural phenomena, filtering through the consciousness and imagination of the artist, becomes purified from all material chance and, in this way, is strengthened and appears more vividly; beauty, which is scattered in nature in its forms and colorings, appears in a picture as concentrated,

Source: "Obshchii smysl iskusstva," *Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii* 5 (1890): 84–102. Reprinted in *Sobranie sochinenii* 6: 75–92.

condensed, and accentuated.<sup>2</sup> It is not possible to be absolutely satisfied now with this explanation, for the sole reason that it is completely inapplicable to entire and prominent branches of art. What phenomena of nature are “accentuated,” for example, in the sonatas of Beethoven? Apparently, the aesthetic connection of art and nature is much more profound and significant. In truth, it consists not in a repetition, but in an extension of the artistic act that is begun by nature—in an impending and more complete resolution of the same aesthetic problem.

The final result of natural processes is man in a two-fold sense: first, as the most beautiful,\* and second as the most conscious natural creature. In this latter capacity, man *himself*, rising out of the result, becomes an *agent* of the universal process and with this more perfectly corresponds to his ideal goal—a complete, mutual permeation and liberated solidarity of the spiritual and the material, the ideal and the real, the subjective and the objective factors and elements of the universe. But why, then, it could be asked, is the entire universal process, begun by nature and continued by man, represented to us precisely from the aesthetic aspect as the solution to some kind of artistic problem? Is it not better to acknowledge as his goal the realization of truth and the good, the triumph of higher reason and will? If, in response to this, we remember that beauty is only an embodiment in sensory forms of the same ideal content that, up until the time of such an embodiment, is called truth and the good, then this calls forth a new objection. The good and the true, a strict moralist will say, have no need of aesthetic incarnation. To do good and to know truth—is all that is necessary.

In reply to this objection we will allow that the good is realized not only in someone’s personal life, but in the life of all of society: an ideal social structure is realized, full solidarity reigns—a universal brotherhood. The impermeability of egoism is abolished; everyone finds themselves in each one and each one in all the others. But if this universal mutual-permeability, in which the essence of the moral good exists, remains prior to material nature; if the spiritual principle that has defeated the impermeability of human psychological egoism cannot overcome the impermeability of matter—the physical ego—this means that this force of the good, or love, is not strong enough, that this moral principle cannot be fully realized and justified completely.

\* I understand beauty here in a general and objective sense, namely, that the outward appearance of a man is capable of expressing a more perfected (more ideal) intrinsic content than can be expressed by other animals.

A question then appears: if the dark force of material existence finally triumphs, if it is insurmountable for the principle of the good, then is there not within it an authentic truth of everything that exists; is not that which we call “the good” only a subjective apparition? And, in fact, is it possible to speak of the triumph of the good, when society, which is constructed on the most ideal moral principles, can immediately perish in consequence of any geological or astronomical cataclysm? The absolute estrangement of moral principle from material existence is not at all detrimental to the latter, but to the former. The very existence of a moral order in the world presupposes its connection with the material order, a certain coordination between them.

But, if this is so, then does it not follow that it is necessary to search for this connection apart from any aesthetic in the direct rule of human reason over the blind forces of nature, in the absolute dominion of spirit over matter? Apparently, several important steps toward this goal have already been taken; when it is achieved, when, thanks to the achievements of applied science, we defeat, as some optimists think, not only space and time but also death itself, then the existence of moral life in the world (on the foundation of material life) will be finally secured—without, however, any relation to aesthetic concern, so that even then the declaration that *the good has no need of beauty* will remain in force. But in such a case, will the good itself *be perfected*? Indeed, it consists not in the triumph of one over the other, but in the solidarity of all. But can creatures and agents of the natural world, as well, be excluded from the list of these *all*? Then one cannot look upon them, either, as upon means or instruments of human existence only; and they also should enter as a positive element into the ideal structure of our life. If, for the sake of its *stability*, moral order must rest on material nature as upon a medium and means of its existence, then for this *fullness* and perfection it must contain in itself the material basis of objective reality as an independent part of ethical activity. Here, ethical activity is transformed into aesthetic activity; for material objective reality can be introduced into moral order only through its illumination, its inspiration, i.e., only in the form of beauty. Thus, beauty is necessary for the fulfillment of the good in the material world, for only by it is the evil darkness of this world illuminated and subdued.\*

However, is not this business of “universal illumination” already perfected apart from us? Natural beauty has already enveloped the world in its

\* On beauty as the ideal cause of the existence of matter, see my articles in “The Philosophical Principles of Integral Knowledge.”

radiant veil; ugly chaos powerlessly stirs beneath the harmonious appearance of the cosmos and cannot itself cast it off either in the infinite space of heavenly bodies or in the constricted domain of earthly organisms. Should not our art only concern itself with encompassing human relations, with incarnating the true meaning of human life in tangible forms? But the dark forces in nature are not persuaded, but only defeated, by universal meaning; the victory itself is superficial and incomplete, and the beauty of nature is just a veil thrown over malevolent life and not a transformation of this life. And for this reason man, with his reasoning consciousness, should be not only the goal of the natural process, but also the means for a contrary, more profound and ample effect upon nature on the side of ideal principle. We know that the realization of this principle already has different degrees of profundity in nature itself; moreover, corresponding to each deepening of the positive aspect there is also a more profound intrinsic strengthening of the negative. If the malevolent principle acts only as gravity and inertia in inorganic matter, then in the organic world it now appears as death and decay. (Moreover, here as well, ugliness does not triumph as brilliantly in the destruction of plants as in the death and decay of animals, and among them the higher more than the lower.) And in man it expresses its most profound essence yet—apart from a greater complexity and the reinforcement of its manifestations from the physical aspect—as moral evil. But here as well the possibility of a final triumph over it and the perfect embodiment of this triumph is in imperishable and eternal beauty.

Today the refurbished ancient view that identifies moral evil with a dark subconscious physical life (of the flesh), and moral good with the reasoning light of consciousness developed in man, is widely propagated. That the light of reason is in itself a good is indisputable; but neither is it possible to call physical light evil. The meaning of one and the other in their corresponding spheres is identical. In the physical world,\* the universal Idea (positive unity, the life of all for one another within One) is realized

\* It goes without saying that I speak here about light not in the sense of visual sensation in man and animals, but in the sense of motion of weightless mediums that connect among themselves material bodies, upon which their objective existence depends for one another independently of subjective senses. The word *light* is used for brevity's sake, since various dynamic phenomena also relate to this: heat, electricity, and so forth. Moreover, we have no concern here with these or other hypotheses of physical science: the indisputable factual *difference* between the manifestations of the phenomena referred to and the manifestations of solid matter is sufficient for us.

only in a reflected sense: all objects and phenomena obtain the potentiality to exist one for another (are revealed one to another) in mutual reflections through a common weightless medium. In a similar way, all that exists is reflected in reason by means of general abstract conceptions which do not convey the intrinsic essence of things but only their superficial logical outlines. Consequently, in rational knowledge we find only a reflection of the universal Idea, and not its real presence in the known and knowable. For its actual realization, truth and the good must become the creative force in an object, transforming, and not just reflecting, reality.

Just as in the physical world, where light is transformed into life and becomes the organizational principle of plants and animals in order not only to be reflected by bodies but to become embodied in them, so too the light of reason cannot be limited by knowledge alone but must embody the conscious meaning of life artistically in a new reality that more closely corresponds to it. Of course, before one does this, before one creates in beauty, or converts a non-ideal reality into an ideal one, it is necessary to know the difference between them—to know not only in abstract reflection, but, before anything else, in the spontaneous feeling belonging to the artist.

## II.

The difference between ideal—i.e., worthy and fitting—existence and unfitting or unworthy existence depends in general on the particular attachment of individual elements of the world to each other and to the whole. Existence is ideal or worthy—that which should be—when three conditions are met. First, when individual elements do not exclude one another, but on the contrary mutually situate themselves within one another, they are in solidarity among themselves; second, when they do not exclude the whole, but maintain their individual existence on a single universal foundation; third, and last, when this all-united basis—or absolute principle—does not repress and does not absorb the individual elements, but in revealing itself to them gives them full freedom in themselves. And while absolute principle exists in itself,\* it appears for us not as given reality, but as an ideal, only in part realized and realizable. In this sense it becomes the final goal and absolute norm of our living reality: the will strives toward it

\* The ground for this assertion belongs to the realm of metaphysics, not aesthetics.

as to its higher good; by it thought takes shape as absolute truth; and in part it is sensed and divined by our senses and imagination as beauty.\*<sup>3</sup>

The same essential identity is found among these positive ideal definitions of worthy existence as among the negative principles corresponding to them. Every evil can be reduced to the destruction of mutual solidarity and balance of the parts and the whole; and every falsehood and every ugliness is also in essence reduced to this. We should acknowledge as *evil* all exclusive self-affirmation (egoism), as well as anarchic particularism and despotic unification. That is to say, evil exists when a particular or individual element asserts itself in its individuality, striving to exclude or oppress another essence; when the particular or individual elements separately or together desire to stand in place of the whole, exclude and negate its independent unity, and through this the common bond among themselves as well; and when, on the contrary, the freedom of an individual being is constricted or abolished in the name of unity.

But the very same thing, when transferred from the practical to the theoretical sphere, is *falsehood*. We call falsehood a thought that takes exclusively one of any individual aspects of existence in the name of which it negates all others; we call falsehood as well an intellectual position that gives place only to an indeterminate aggregate of particular empirical states, negating the common meaning or rational unity of the universe. Finally, we should acknowledge as falsehood abstract monism or pantheism which negates all individual existence in the name of a principle of absolute unity.† And ugliness is defined in the aesthetic sphere by the very same essential signs by which evil is defined in the moral sphere and falsehood in the intellectual sphere. All ugliness consists in a single part infinitely expanding and prevailing over others,‡ where there is no unity and wholeness and, finally, where there is no free-flowing diversity. Anarchical plurality too is as contrary as deathly oppressive unity is to the

\* Various thinkers arrive at the notion of an existing identity of beauty and the good and of the moral task of art from completely different angles and aspects. An original and talented expression of this notion is found in the recently departed French writer Guyau in his work “De l’art au point de vue sociologique.” The view of Guyau is set forth by Gol’tsev in his book on art, other parts of which also merit attention.

† The falsehood of this principle in such an application of it comes to light clearly from the internal contradiction into which it, moreover, falls; for in becoming *exclusive*, unity stops being *absolute*.

‡ See examples of this in my article “Beauty in Nature.”

good, truth, and beauty: any attempt to realize the latter for the senses is reduced to the conception of an infinite desert, bereft of any individual and definite forms of existence, that is, reduced to pure ugliness.

Ideal existence befitting merit requires identical freedom for the whole and for the parts—consequently this is not freedom from particularities but only from their exclusivity. The fullness of this freedom requires that all the particular elements find themselves in one another and in the whole, that each supposes itself in the other and the other in it, that it senses in its particularity the unity of the whole and in the whole its particularity—in a word, the absolute solidarity of all existence: God is everything in everyone.

The fully perceptible realization of this universal solidarity or positive all-unity—perfect beauty not only as a reflection of any idea from matter but its actual presence in matter—presupposes first of all the most profound and the closest interaction between inward (or spiritual) and outward (or material) existence. This is a fundamental and strictly aesthetic requirement, the specific distinction of beauty from the other two aspects of absolute Idea. Ideal content that remains only as an intrinsic property of spirit, its will and thought, is bereft of beauty; and the absence of beauty is impotence of Idea. In fact, while spirit is incapable of giving to its interior content a direct outward expression, it remains embodied in material phenomenon; and, on the other hand, until such time as matter is capable of perceiving ideal activity of spirit, of permeating phenomena, of converting or transubstantiating in spirit, then there is no solidarity between these chief realms of existence. And this means that in Idea itself, which is namely the perfected solidarity of all that exists, there is in this, its phenomenon, as yet no sufficient force for the final realization or fulfillment of its essence. An abstract embodiment of spirit incapable of creation and a spiritless matter incapable of animation are both incompatible with ideal or worthy existence, and both carry upon themselves the manifest sign of their unworthiness in the fact that neither one nor the other can be beautiful.

For plenitude of beauty, qualities are required in the following way: 1) direct materialization of spiritual essence, and 2) complete animation of material phenomena, as the proper and inalienable form of ideal content. A third condition is joined to—or better to say, proceeds directly from—this dual condition: during the direct and inseparable unification in beauty of spiritual content with sensual expression, in their full mutual penetration, a material phenomenon actually having become beautiful,

that is, really having embodied in itself Idea, it should become in the very same way as abiding and immortal as Idea itself. According to Hegelian aesthetics, beauty is the embodiment of universal and eternal Idea in particular and transient phenomena; moreover, both remain transient and vanish, as separate waves in the stream of the material process, only reflecting the radiance of eternal Idea for a moment. But this is possible only by an indifferent equanimity of relations between spiritual principle and material phenomenon. Authentic and perfect beauty, expressing full solidarity and mutual penetration of these two elements, should necessarily achieve one of them (the material) in true correspondence with the immortality of the other.

In turning to beautiful phenomena of the physical world, we find that they far from fulfill the indicated requirements or conditions of perfected beauty. First, ideal content in natural beauty is insufficiently transparent; it does not reveal here all its enigmatic profundity but displays only its general contours, so to speak, in particular concrete phenomena, the most elementary signs and attributes of absolute Idea. So light in its sensory qualities displays the all-permeability and the weightlessness of ideal principle; plants in their visible form manifest the expansiveness of life's Idea and the universal striving of the earthly spirit toward higher forms of existence; beautiful animals express the intensity of life's motives, united in a complex whole and well balanced in order to allow a free play of life forces, and so forth.

Indubitably, Idea is embodied in all this, but only in the most general and superficial way, from its extrinsic aspect. Here the animation of matter superficially corresponds to this superficial materialization of ideal principle in natural beauty. The possibility of an apparent contradiction of form with content comes from this: a malevolent beast can typically be very beautiful (the contradiction here is only apparent, namely because natural beauty, according to its extrinsic character in general, is not capable of expressing the Idea of life in its intrinsic, moral quality, but only in its superficial physical properties, such as force, swiftness, freedom of movement, and so forth).

A third essential imperfection of natural beauty is connected to this as well: since this beauty is only on the outside and in general conceals the unsightliness of material existence and does not penetrate it inwardly and completely (in all its parts), then this beauty is also preserved as changeless and eternal only *in general*, in its general patterns—kinds and forms. Each individual beautiful phenomenon and creature in

its own life remains under the power of the material process, which at first breaches its beautiful form and then also completely destroys it. From the point of view of naturalism, this instability of all individual phenomena of beauty is a fateful, inescapable law. But in order to reconcile, at least theoretically, with this triumph of the all-destructive material process, it is necessary to acknowledge beauty in the world (as logical minds of this tendency do), and in general all that is ideal, as the subjective illusion of human imagination. But we know that beauty has objective significance, that it acts outside of the human world, that nature itself is not indifferent to beauty. And in such case, if it does not succeed in realizing perfected beauty in the realm of physical life, then it is not for nothing that it has arisen out of this lower realm by great labors and efforts, frightening catastrophes, and ugly, but necessary, begettings into the realm of conscious human life for a final purpose. The task, unfulfilled by means of physical life, must be fulfilled by means of human creative work.

Out of this comes a three-fold mission of art in general: 1) the direct objectivization of those most profound, intrinsic definitions and qualities of life's Idea that cannot be expressed by nature; 2) the animation of natural beauty; and through this, 3) the perpetuation of its individual phenomena. This is the metamorphosis of physical life into spiritual life, that is, into first, a life that contains within itself its Logos, or revelation, capable of being expressed directly outside itself; second, a life that has the capacity of inwardly converting or animating matter, or truly being incarnated in it; and third, a life that is free from the power of the material process and therefore remains eternal.

The highest task of art is the perfected incarnation of this spiritual fullness in our reality, a realization in it of absolute beauty, or the creation of a universal spiritual organism. It is clear that the fulfillment of this task should coincide with the conclusion of the entire universal process. While history still continues, we can have only partial and fragmentary *forewarnings* (anticipations) of perfected beauty; today's art, in its greatest works, captures flashes of eternal beauty in our current reality and extends them further, forewarns, gives presentiment of a supernatural future reality for us, and serves, in this way, as a transition and connecting link between the beauty of nature and the beauty of the life to come.<sup>4</sup> Art understood in this way ceases being empty amusement and becomes an important and edifying concern, not at all in the sense of didactic sermon, but rather, only in the sense of inspired *prophecy*.

That such a lofty significance of art is not an arbitrary requirement follows logically from the indissoluble bond that formerly actually existed between art and religion. Of course, we do not regard this original indivisibility of religious and artistic affairs as ideal. True, full beauty requires greater space for the human element and presupposes a higher and more complex development of social life than could be achieved in primitive culture. We view the contemporary alienation between religion and art as a transition from their ancient amalgamation to a future free synthesis. Indeed, perfected life, the anticipation of which we find in true art, will be based not on the absorption of the human element by the divine, but on their free interaction.

Now we can give a general definition of real art in its essence: *every tangible representation of any object and phenomenon from the point of view of its final, definitive status, or in light of the world to come, is artistic work.*

### III.

These presentiments of perfected beauty in human art are of three kinds:

1) *Direct or magical*, when the most profound intrinsic status that connects us with the authentic essence of things and with the supernatural world (or, if you like, with the being *an sich* of all of that which exists), in breaking through all conditionality and material limitations, finds for itself a direct and full expression in beautiful sounds and words (music and, in part, pure lyric).<sup>\*5</sup>

2) *Indirect, through intensification*—transformation of given beauty, when the intrinsically existing, eternal meaning of life, latent in particular and casual phenomena of the natural and human world and only dimly and insufficiently expressed in their natural beauty, is revealed and made clear

\* I mean here lyric poetry (and also lyric points in certain epic poetry and drama), the aesthetic impression of which is not exhausted by the thoughts and forms that their *philological* content consists of. Lermontov likely hinted at this in certain verses:

There are sounds—in significance  
Dark, or worthless,  
But it is impossible  
To hear them without emotion.

by the artist through the reproduction of these phenomena in concentrated, refined, idealized form: so architecture reproduces in idealized appearance certain regular forms of natural bodies and expresses the triumph of these ideal forms over the principal, anti-ideal properties of matter—weight and gravity. Classical sculpture, idealizing the beauty of the human form and strictly observing the thin, but precise, line separating corporeal and carnal beauty, foresees in artistic representation the spiritual corporeality that is sometimes revealed to us in living reality; landscape painting (and, in part, lyrical poetry) reproduces in concentrated form the ideal aspect of visible nature's complex phenomena, refining from them all material coincidence (even three-dimensional space); and religious painting (poetry as well) is the idealized reproduction of those phenomena from the history of mankind in which a higher meaning of our life was revealed in advance.

3) *Indirect, through reflection*—A final, third, and negative kind of aesthetic presentiment of impending perfected reality, of the ideal from a medium not congruous with it, typically reinforced by the artist for greater vividness of reflection. Incongruity between a given reality and Idea, or the higher meaning of life, can be of a different sort: first, a particular human reality, *in its own way* perfected and beautiful (namely in the sense of *natural* man), does not, however, satisfy the absolute ideal for which *spiritual* man and humanity are destined. Achilles and Hector, Priam and Agamemnon, Krishna, Arjuna, and Rama—are indubitably beautiful, but the more artistically represented they and their concerns are, the clearer it is *in the final analysis* that they are not real people and that it is not their exploits that constitute actual human affairs. In all likelihood, Homer—and probably the authors of Indian epics as well—did not have this notion in mind; and we should call “heroic epic” the unconscious and indistinct reflection of the absolute ideal from a beautiful human reality—but one not adequate to it—and which therefore is doomed to destruction:

There will come a day, even sacred Troy will perish.  
And with her Priam of the spear and his entire nation.<sup>6</sup>

Modern poets, returning to the themes of an ancient epoch, consciously and in the form of universal truth express the idea that itself appears concretely in their examples. Such is “The Victory Celebration” of Schiller:

All that is great on earth  
 Scatters like smoke:  
 Today the lot has fallen to Troy,  
 Tomorrow it will fall to another. . . <sup>7</sup>

and even clearer (as an emphasized impression) in Zhukovsky's ballad:

Ida has grown dark,  
 Ilion has become somber,  
 The figure of Atrida sleeps in the dark,  
 On the plain of battle a dream. . . —etc. <sup>8</sup>

We find more profound attitudes toward the unrealized ideal in tragedy, where the persons portrayed are themselves permeated by the consciousness of the intrinsic contradiction between their reality and that which should be. Comedy, on the other hand, strengthens and deepens the sense of the ideal by the fact that, first, it underscores an aspect of reality that in no sense can be called beautiful, and second—it represents the persons living this reality as completely *content* with it, which aggravates their contradiction with the ideal. This *complacency*—in no way the intrinsic attribute of the subject—constitutes the essential sign of the comedic in distinction to the tragic element. So, for example, Oedipus, having killed his father and married his mother, could have been, in spite of this fact, a highly comedic person if he had related to his frightening adventures with placid complacency, finding that everything happened accidentally, that he was guilty of nothing, and therefore he could calmly utilize the kingdom that he had acquired. <sup>\*</sup>

In defining comedy as a negative presentiment of life's beauty through the typical portrayal of anti-ideal reality *in its complacency*, we understand by this complacency, of course, in no way the contentedness of one or another actor with one or another particular situation, but only a general complacency with the entire given structure of life, fully shared as well by those actors who are discontented with something in a given moment. So, Molière's heroes are certainly very discontented when they are beaten with

<sup>\*</sup> Of course, the comic element would be possible here namely because the crime was not a personally intended action. The *conscious* criminal, who is satisfied with himself and his affairs, is not tragic but repulsive, and in no way comical.

sticks, but they are completely satisfied by the order of things in which beating with sticks is one of the fundamental forms of community.

Similarly, although Chatsky in "Woe from Wit" is earnestly dissatisfied with the life of Moscow society, it is patently obvious from his speeches that he would be completely content with this life if only Sophia Pavlovna would pay him more attention, if Famusov's guests did not listen with reverence to the girl from Bordeaux, and if they did not chatter away in French: therefore, for all his discontent and even despair, Chatsky would remain an absolutely comical person even if he were altogether a living person. <sup>\*9</sup> Sometimes moral indignation regarding some detail emphasizes a contentedness with all of bad reality; out of this a comic impression is even reinforced. So, in "The Wedding of Krechinskii," the striking comic element of one monologue is based on the fact that the character speaking, having suffered for card-sharpping, finds it completely normal that some cheat at cards; and while others beat them for this, they are only indignant at the excessiveness of retribution in a given case. <sup>10</sup>

Apart from the indicated difference between epic, tragic, and comic elements, <sup>†</sup> if we divide all human types in artistic representation into positive and negative (as is usually done), then it is easy to see that the first should predominate in the fine arts (sculpture and painting) and the second—in poetry. For sculpture and painting have direct concern with corporeal forms, the beauty of which is already realized in reality, although still also requiring amplification or idealization; whereas the main subject of poetry is the moral and social life of humanity, infinitely far from the

<sup>\*</sup> It has already been noted long ago in literary criticism (if I am not mistaken, by Belinsky) that the title "Woe from Wit" does not correspond at all to the content of the comedy, since Chatsky does not exhibit any singular intellect, and displays only vacuous and petty embitterment—his woe comes from a completely extrinsic and incidental circumstance. Griboedev himself could have thought differently, but this does not change the essence of the matter at all. It is apparent from recently published biographical data that in the work "Woe from Wit" there was more the operation of indirect inspiration than well-defined creative thought: Griboedev saw his comedy in a dream before he wrote it. It is all the more probable that all of his other creations—conceived but not published—are totally worthless, just as it is with the character of the hero in "Woe from Wit"—obviously invented and therefore completely lifeless in his dialogues—intended as intelligent, but in essence nonsensical.

<sup>†</sup> In the sphere of fine art, historical painting corresponds to the epic poem, and in part to tragedy, genre-painting—to comedy, but portrait art, depending on its portrayed characters, can have both an epic and tragic, as well as comic significance.

realization of its ideal. Prophetic divination and a directly creative force, which are essential for the poetic portrayal of a perfect man\* or an ideal society, are not necessary in order to sculpt a beautiful body or to describe a beautiful character.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, apart from religious epics (which, with several exceptions, merit approval only according to design and not according to execution), the greatest poets refrained from a portrayal of directly ideal or positive types. In Shakespeare, these appear as hermits (in “Romeo and Juliet”) or magicians (in “The Tempest”), but for the most part as women, and namely those possessing more of a directly natural purity than a spiritual-human moral character. And Schiller, having had a weakness for virtuous types of both sexes, portrayed them comparatively poorly.

We take Goethe’s *Faust* in order to see that in the greatest works of poetry the meaning of spiritual life is realized only through the *reflection* of non-ideal human reality. The positive meaning of this lyrical-epic tragedy is revealed directly only in the last scene of the second part and abstractly recapitulated in the concluding chorus: “Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis,” etc.<sup>12</sup> But where is the direct organic connection between this apotheosis and the other parts of the tragedy? The heavenly powers and “das Ewig-Weibliche” appear from above—consequently from without—and the content itself does not come to light from within.<sup>13</sup> The idea of the last scene is present in all of *Faust*, but it is only a reflection of the (partly real, partly fantastic) action of which the tragedy itself consists. Similar to the way that a ray of light plays within a diamond to the pleasure of the observer, but without any change of the material basis of stone, so too here the spiritual light of the absolute ideal, refracted by the imagination of the artist, illuminates dark human reality but does not at all change its essence.

Let us allow that a more powerful poet than Goethe or Schiller presented to us, in a complex poetical work, an artistic, i.e., veracious and concrete, portrayal of truly spiritual life—that which should be, which completely realizes the absolute ideal. In any case, such a marvel of art, too, not having been managed by a single poet up to the present,<sup>†</sup> would be, in the midst of present reality, only a magnificent mirage in a waterless

\* The character of Christ is portrayed poetically only in the Gospels—by witnesses and chroniclers, and not by artists.

† In the third part of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante portrays heaven with characteristics, which, while perhaps truthful, are in any event insufficiently alive and concrete—an essential shortcoming which cannot be atoned for even with euphonious verse.

desert, vexing and not quenching our spiritual thirst. Perfect art in its definitive mission should embody the absolute ideal not only in imagination, but also in actual fact—should animate and transubstantiate our real life. If it is said that such a mission exceeds the bounds of art, then one can ask: Who established these limits? In history we do not find them; we see here an art that is changing—in the process of development. Some of its branches achieve the possibility of a kind of perfection and more do not succeed; but then new ones arise. Everyone, it seems, is in agreement with the fact that sculpture achieved its definitive perfection with the ancient Greeks; it is hardly possible as well to expect further progress in the realm of heroic epic and pure tragedy.

I will allow myself to go further: I do not find particularly bold the assertion that, just as the indicated forms of art have already been perfected by the ancients, so too modern European nations have now exhausted all other kinds of art known to us; and if the latter has a future, then it is in a completely new sphere of action. Of course, this future development of aesthetic creativity depends on the general course of history; for art in general is the sphere of the incarnation of ideas, and not their elementary conception and growth.



